

2009

The Man Who Would Be Caliph: A Sixteenth Century Sultan's Bid for an African Empire

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The Man Who Would Be Caliph: A Sixteenth-Century Sultan's Bid for an African Empire

By Stephen Cory

Introduction

In the early months of 1591, local villagers from the West African Songhay Empire spotted an unusual sight.[1] Moving at a steady pace across the desert was an army of some 3,000–4,000 soldiers, armed with cannons and muskets.[2] If the villagers had not known better, they surely would have thought themselves to be the victims of a desert mirage. But this surprising vision was no trick of light reflecting off the golden sands of the Sahara. Within days, the Moroccan army had reassembled itself on the banks of the Niger River and would soon defeat a hastily constructed Songhay force of between 28,000–50,000 men at the Battle of Tondibi (March 13, 1591).[3] West Africa would never be the same again.

It was the Sa`di sultan Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur who undertook this risky venture, which no other Moroccan ruler has attempted before or since. In 1590, al-Mansur launched a full-scale invasion of the Songhay Empire, after seeking to gain control over the region for a number of years. The Moroccan sultan claimed he undertook this attack to unify the Muslim lands of western Africa under one leader. And who could be a better choice as monarch than al-Mansur himself, the sharifian descendent of the Prophet and the legitimate leader of the entire Muslim world? Although this claim to right of sovereignty would have been vigorously disputed by the Turkish sultan in Istanbul, the Ottomans had not been able to extend their empire into West Africa and could do nothing to assist the Songhay in their predicament.

What were al-Mansur's motives for invading West Africa? The reasons given by Mulay Ahmad himself derive from his claim to be the divinely-appointed caliph over the international Muslim community; and thus he asserted his right to secure the submission and proper defense of Islamic lands. However, most historians believe that al-Mansur's considerations were more material than spiritual when he undertook his controversial

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[1] The Songhay Empire was established by Sunni `Ali in the late fifteenth century. Its central lands consisted of the Middle Niger River region, including the cities of Jenne, Timbuktu, and Gao, an area mostly contained in the modern countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. At its greatest height, its territory also extended into the modern countries of Senegal and Nigeria. The empire gained much of its wealth through controlling the southern end of the prosperous trans-Saharan gold trade.

[2] For the estimated number of Moroccan troops, see John Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa`di's Ta'rīkh al-sūdān down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 188 n. 13.

[3] For the estimated number of Songhay troops at Tondibi, see Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 189–190 n. 25.

assault upon a fellow Muslim dynasty.[4] They maintain the *sharif* had an insatiable desire to gain full control over the prosperous gold trade that had been carried on for centuries in West Africa.[5] Indeed, the influx of gold into Morocco, a direct result of this invasion, earned al-Mansur the title of "al-Dhahabi" ("The golden one").

Those who argue that greed was the principal motive for the invasion can point to a number of primary sources that seem to support their charge. And yet, careful consideration of all the historical evidence reveals this interpretation to be overly simplistic. A complex and extraordinarily ambitious man, Mulay Ahmad had a vision far greater than simply stuffing his coffers with Songhay gold. The Moroccan sultan saw his conquest of Songhay as the first step in a grand scheme to unite Islamic Africa under a revived Arab caliphate, this time arising from the west rather than the east. His goals were no less than to challenge the mighty Ottoman Empire itself. Al-Mansur's claims represented an attempt by an Early Modern monarch to reinvigorate an institution (the caliphate) that had been important during the earliest centuries of Islam, but which had vanished in all but name after the decline and fall of the Abbasid Empire.[6]

The Fight for North Africa

By 1591, Morocco's international position had improved dramatically over a period of fifty years. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the country was on the brink of being divided among several foreign powers. The Portuguese had made considerable inroads into Morocco by subjugating a series of ports on the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts.[7] Fresh from its final conquest of al-Andalus, the newly powerful Spanish state was beginning to show interest in the Maghrib as well, capturing Mediterranean ports in modern-day Algeria and Tunisia. And the Ottoman dynasty also threatened from the east, having recently established footholds in eastern and central North Africa, from where it battled Spain for Mediterranean supremacy.[8] In the face of such challenges, the weak Wattasid dynasty,

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[4] For this argument, see E.W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (1958; reprint, Princeton: Markus Weiner, 1995), 154–202; Charles-André Julien, *History of North Africa from the Arab Conquest to 1830*, ed. Roger Le Tourneau, trans. John Petrie, re-ed. C.C. Stewart (1952; reprint, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 232–235; Abdallah Laroui, *The History of the Maghrib: An Interpretive Essay*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 256–58; Jerome Bruce Weiner, "Fitna, Corsairs, and Diplomacy: Morocco and the Maritime States of Western Europe, 1603–1672" (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1976), 36–37.

[5] A *sharif* (plural: *shurafa'*) is an individual who claims to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad. In Morocco, most *shurafa'* trace their lineage through Muhammad's grandson Hasan.

[6] Most historians believe that the Abbasid caliphate was in full decline by the late ninth century. However, the Abbasids continued to claim the position of caliph until the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258.

7 For the history of the Portuguese outposts in Morocco, see Vasco de Carvalho, *La domination portugaise au Maroc du XVeme au XVIIIeme siècle (1415–1769)* (Lisbon: SPN, 1942); Pierre de Cenival, trans., *Chronique de Santa Cruz do Cap de Gue* (Paris: Geuthner, 1934); and J. Goulven, *La Place de Mazagan sous la domination portugaise (1502–1769)* (Paris: Emile Larose, 1917). Robert Ricard has written extensively on the Portuguese colonial period in Morocco, including Robert Ricard, *Études sur l'histoire des Portugais au Maroc* (Coimbra, Port.: Universidade de Coimbra, 1955).

which ruled from Fez, sought to maintain whatever sovereignty it could through alliances with one or another of these foreign powers.

It was in response to this foreign threat that the Sa`di state, rising out of the fertile Sus valley in southern Morocco, first gained momentum. The earliest Sa`di sultans garnered a following through their claim to be direct descendents of the Prophet. Declaring a holy war against the Portuguese intruders, those sultans won some impressive victories. After expelling the Portuguese from southern Morocco, the Sa`dis built a power base in Marrakesh from which they launched a full-scale attack on the crumbling Wattasid dynasty.[9] Their conquest of Fez in 1549 put them into direct confrontation with the Ottomans, who had been hoping to gain entry into the country through that important city. The Sa`di sultan Muhammad al-Shaykh gained credibility by fighting the superior Ottoman forces to a standstill near Tlemcen, checking their westward advance.[10]

However, the greatest Sa`di victory was to come a few decades later. Concerned about their flagging fortunes in Morocco, the Portuguese launched an all-out invasion of the country. This proved to be a disastrous mistake. In 1578, the forces of King Sebastian suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Sa`dis at Wadi al-Makhazan in northern Morocco. Sebastian himself was killed in this battle, along with the Sa`di sultan `Abd al-Malik and his rival, al-Mutawakkil, which led Europeans to refer to the conflict as "The Battle of the Three Kings."[11] Amidst an aura of increasing international prestige, Ahmad al-Mansur rose to the sultanate. Although Mulay Ahmad had remained in the shadows of Sa`di politics, the Ottomans and Spaniards were mistaken if they thought they could manipulate this quiet man. Al-Mansur proved to be shrewd and capable, and he was able to protect his country from invasion by superior foreign forces throughout his twenty-five years in power.

Once he established authority within his domains and secured his borders from outside invaders, the ambitious young sultan looked for opportunities to extend his influence abroad. Living in the shadow of the famous Almoravid and Almohad dynasties,

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[8] For a summary of Ottoman expansion and rule in North Africa, see Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144–205; and Laroui, *The History of the Maghrib*, 273–335. For the Ottoman competition with Spain over North Africa, see Andrew C. Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier: A History of the Sixteenth-Century Ibero-African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[9] The Sa`dis' main military victory over the Portuguese along the Moroccan coast was their conquest of Santa Cruz (modern Agadir) in 1540. Following that victory, the Portuguese decided to cut their losses and pulled out of Safi and Azemmour, although they refortified Mazagan (modern Al Jadida), which they held until 1769. For the significance of the Moroccan conquest of Santa Cruz, see Weston F. Cook, *The Hundred Years War for Morocco: Gunpowder and the Military Revolution in the Early Modern Muslim World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 194–200.

[10] Cook, *Hundred Years War for Morocco*, 218–224; Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier*, 76–78; Dahiru Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century: Problems and Patterns in African Foreign Policy* (Bristol: Longman Group, 1981), 11–17.

[11] Cook, *Hundred Years War for Morocco*, 241–55; E.W. Bovill, *The Battle of Alcazar: An Account of the Defeat of Don Sebastian of Portugal at El-Ksar el-Kebir* (London: Batchworth, 1952); Pierre Berthier, *La Bataille de l'oued el-Makhazen dite Bataille des Trois Rois (4 Aout 1578)* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1985).

al-Mansur's claim to greatness depended largely upon the degree to which he could expand the borders of his state. With the doors for conquest to the north and east slammed shut by the Spaniards and the Ottomans, the sultan's only option for expansion lay to the south.

At the time of al-Mansur's ascension to power, West Africa was divided among several sub-Saharan Muslim states, including the Songhay, the Kanem, the Bornu, the Mossi, the Hausa, and the Dendi. Map 1 shows the locations of these states relative to Morocco.[12] The Songhay was the most powerful of these dynasties and ruled a territory directly southeast of Morocco. A prosperous gold trade, which had its source in Songhay lands, had been carried on throughout northwest Africa for centuries.[13] The desire to gain control of this resource had been a key factor motivating the Portuguese incursions into southern Morocco, and many historians assume that this same desire was the driving force behind al-Mansur's forays into the region.

Reviving the Caliphate

Rather than simply assume that al-Mansur had the same goals as the Portuguese, it behooves us to consider his actions from within an Islamic context. Mulay Ahmad claimed the title of caliph, a position whose origins date back to the earliest years of Islamic history. The original caliphs were believed to be successors of the Prophet Muhammad. Their position initially involved both spiritual and political leadership over the entire Muslim community, as is reflected in the title "Commander of the Faithful."[14] Particularly critical to the political legitimacy of the early caliphs was their association with the house of the Prophet, their claim to uphold the practices of the true faith, and their successful expansion and defense of Islamic realms through military might.[15]

However, the caliphs eventually lost both their religious authority and political control over Islamic lands. By the tenth century, regional sultans held the real political power and religious authority was in the hands of the *ulama* (council of learned men). No serious attempts were made to revive caliphal authority along its original lines until the sixteenth century. After conquering Arab lands in the early part of that century, the Ottoman dynasty began to lay claim to the title of caliph, in order to legitimize its primary position in the Islamic world. However, the Ottomans were at a disadvantage in this, since they could not claim sharifian descent, and they soon abandoned the project. On the other hand, Ahmad al-Mansur had arisen from a family that was widely believed to have descended from the Prophet. Thus, shortly after becoming sultan, al-Mansur began to

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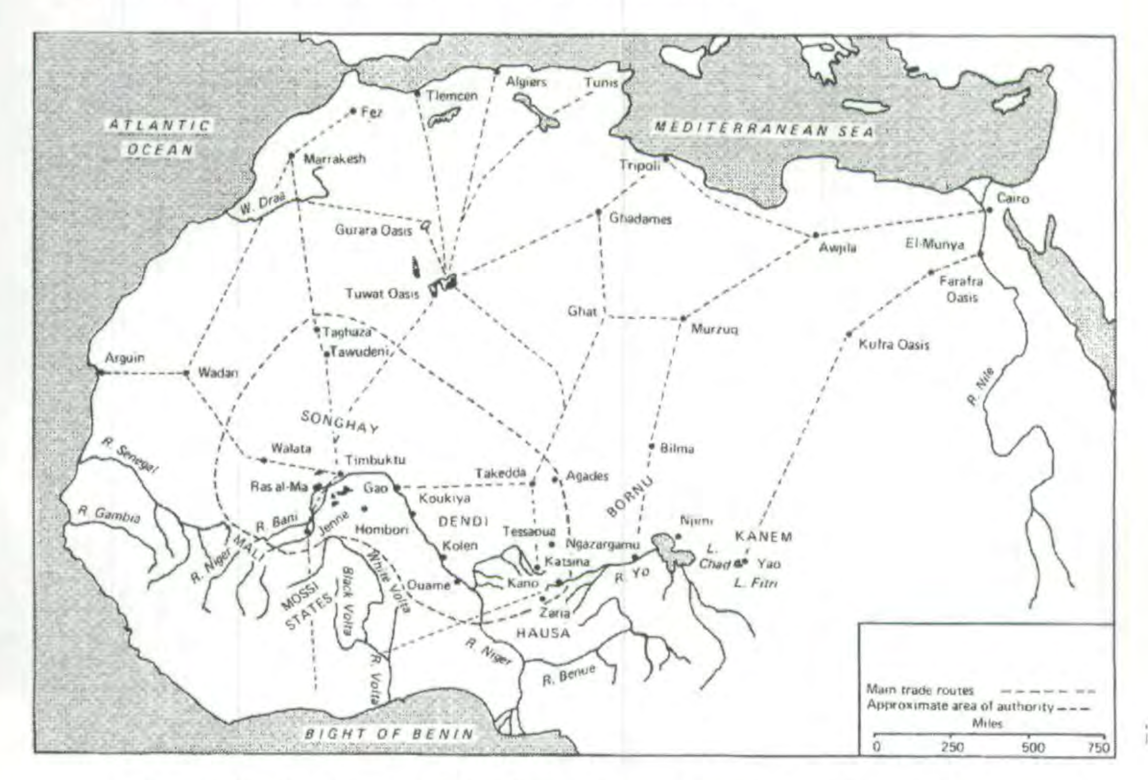
[12] The area ruled by these dynasties was referred to as the Sudan, a term derived from the Arabic word for "black." Thus the title "Sudan" had a much broader connotation than its modern reference to a specific country in northeastern Africa.

[13] For a thorough discussion of this trade, see Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors.*

[14] For a thorough discussion of the original meaning of the title of caliph, see Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[15] Qualifications for the caliphate were summed up succinctly by the eleventh century jurist, `Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi. For an English translation of his discussion of caliphal governance, see Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Habib al-Basri al-Baghdadi al-Mawardi (d. 450 AH), *Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah = The Laws of Islamic Governance*, trans. Asadullah Yate (London: Ta-Ha, 1996).

openly assert that his caliphal claims better fit the historic qualifications for the position of "Commander of the Faithful" than did those of the Ottomans.[16]



Map 1. North Africa and the Sudan. Source: Lansine Kaba, "Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes: The Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay Resistance (1591–1612)," *Journal of African History* 22, 4 (1981), 457-475, Cambridge University Press. Used by permission.

It was in this role as the rightful caliph over the Islamic world that al-Mansur approached the Muslim rulers of the kingdoms south of the Sahara. In letters written to the rulers of Bornu, Kebbi, and Songhay, al-Mansur asserted his caliphal supremacy and maintained that he was only attempting to restore Islamic unity as God intended, under the rightful leadership of the family of the Prophet. The sultan's letters to the sub-Saharan monarchs emphasized that he needed their support to stem the progress of the unbelieving Europeans, and to fulfill his role as leader of holy war to advance the expansion of Islam.[17]

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[16] For information on the Ottoman use of the title of caliph, see the following works: H.A.R. Gibb, "Lufti Pasha on the Ottoman Caliphate," *Oriens* 15 (1962), 287–95; Colin Imber, "Süleymân as Caliph of the Muslims: Ebû's-Su'ûd's Formulation of Ottoman Dynastic Ideology," in Gilles Veinstein, ed., *Soliman le Magnifique et son Temps* (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1992), 179–84; Colin Imber, "Ideals and Legitimation in Early Ottoman History," in Metin Kunt and Christine Woodhead, eds., *Suleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World* (London: Longman, 1995), 138–53; Chantal de la Véronne, "Relations entre le Maroc et la Turquie dans la seconde moitié du XVI et le XVII siècle (1554–1616)," *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerraneé* 15–16 (1973), 391–401.

[17] Several of these letters have been translated into English and can be found in Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 292–308. Others appear in their original Arabic in `Abd Allah Gannun, *Rasa'il al-Sa'diyya* (Titwān, Morocco: Ma'had Mūlayi al-Hasan, 1954).

The clear implication of his message was that, as members of *Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam), the sub-Saharan Africans should willingly submit to al-Mansur as the rightful caliph over all Muslims. Submission would bring blessing and prosperity, while resistance would bring destruction.

The Sa`di sultan appears to have envisioned a caliphate that would span the Sahara on both sides, and would serve as a challenge to Ottoman supremacy. Although this idea seems far-fetched to us now, living as we do in the age of nationalism and self-determination, al-Mansur's approach was in accordance with historic Islamic ideology. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates had managed to hold together vast empires, spanning large territories that today encompass a number of separate national entities and peoples of different ethnicities. During the time of al-Mansur, the Ottoman Empire also brought together many different regions under one head, while, superficially at least, applying the title of caliph to their sultan. Al-Mansur had no reason to think that he could not do the same, especially since his claims for leadership were better than those of the Ottomans. In addition, long-standing economic and religious connections between North and West Africa encouraged the sultan to conceive of these two areas as one community, which ought to be linked politically as well.[18] He argued that, as a *sharif*, he was uniquely qualified to lead this community, and that the rulers of the sub-Saharan Islamic states should recognize and submit to his authority.

Windows into the Past

Just because al-Mansur claimed the caliphate to justify his invasion doesn't mean that he wasn't manipulating ideology to support theft of Songhay gold. In fact, a number of historians have accused him of doing just that. In order to properly evaluate the sultan's motives, we must consider the contemporary historical sources for the Moroccan conquest of Songhay. The most important Moroccan account was written by the sultan's scribe, `Abd al-`Aziz al-Fishtali. Al-Fishtali's account, *Manāhil al-safā' fī ma'athir mawālīnā al-shurafā'* ("The Pure Springs of the Exploits of our Lords the Sharifs"), is considered an apologetic work for al-Mansur's reign.[19] It describes al-Mansur's preparations for, and the events connected with, the Moroccan invasion. It also provides copies of contemporary documents related to the conquest. Later Moroccan historians such as al-Ifrani, al-Zayyani,

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[18] Although Westerners have often failed to recognize these links between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, this mental barrier has not always existed in the minds of Africans. The oldest written records that we have of sub-Saharan Africa are almost all from the pens of Arab writers. The earliest Arab writers testify to the virility of Maghribi trade with sub-Saharan Africa, which had been carried on since prior to the coming of Islam. The expansion of Islam within the sub-Saharan lands during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries created another bond between the two areas. Sub-Saharan African scholars kept themselves abreast of intellectual and political developments in such northern centers as Cairo and Fez, and those Africans who were fortunate enough to make the pilgrimage to Mecca passed through the Maghrib, further strengthening connections. Sometimes influences ran in the other direction. In the eleventh century, nomadic tribes from the southern Sahara established the famous Almoravid dynasty, which ruled the western Maghrib and al-Andalus for over one hundred years.

[19] Abu Faris `Abd al-`Aziz al-Fishtali, *Manāhil al-safā' fī ma'athir mawālīnā al-shurafā'*, ed. `Abd al-Karim Kurayyim (1973; reprint, Casablanca: Matba`at al-Najāh al-Jadīda, 2005).

and al-Nasiri largely drew their information about the invasion from the account of al-Fishtali.[20]

The problem with al-Fishtali's text is that it is clearly a panegyric source, which was written with the aim of glorifying the regime of Ahmad al-Mansur. Al-Fishtali frequently makes statements that appear to be exaggerated or even fabricated. His account is written in an extremely complex literary style known as *insha'*, which was used to produce official documents in pre-modern Arab courts.[21] For these reasons, many historians have completely avoided dealing with al-Fishtali, preferring to use the more orderly presentation found in the eighteenth-century history of al-Ifrani. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that the sultan's scribe was the nearest contemporary source to al-Mansur, and thus the most likely to understand his master's purposes in undertaking an assault upon the Songhay. In order to fully explain the Moroccan invasion, we must consider the text of al-Fishtali.

The earliest account from a West African perspective is *Tarīkh al-Fattash* ("Chronicle of the Researcher"), which is usually attributed to Mahmud al-Ka`ti, a scholar of Timbuktu who died in 1593.[22] Al-Ka`ti was mainly interested in describing the impact of the invasion upon West Africa and he says very little about al-Mansur. Another early account from a West African perspective is *Ta'rīkh al-Sūdān* ("History of the Sudan"), by Abdarrahman al-Sa`di.[23] Written in the late seventeenth century, al-Sa`di's work is based upon contemporary sources. His text provides an extensive account of the Moroccan invasion, including numerous comments about the Sa`dis and al-Mansur. He discusses events leading up to the invasion and reports correspondence between al-Mansur and several Songhay rulers (Askias) over a fifteen-year period. Some of al-Sa`di's details seem to contradict al-Fishtali and thus modern historians use his text to impugn the veracity of al-Mansur's scribe.

Various other documents also shed light upon this controversial conquest. These include accounts by European observers, such as English, Spanish, or Portuguese

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20 Al-Ifrānī, Muhammad al-Saghīr ibn al-Hajj, *Nuzhat al-hādī bi akhbār mulūk al-qarn al-hādī*, ed. `Abd al-Latīf al-Shādhilī (Casablanca: Matba`at al-Najāh al-Jadīda, 1998), ed. in Arabic and French trans. Octave Houdas, *Nozhet-Elhadi: Histoire de la dynastie Saadienne (1511–1670)* (Paris: Leroux, 1888–1889); Al-Zayyānī, Abū al-Qāsim Ahmad ibn `Alī ibn Ibrāhīm, *Al-Turjumān al-Mu'rib`an duwal al-Mashriq wa al-Maghrib*, trans. Octave Houdas, *Le Maroc de 1631 à 1812* (Paris: E. Laroux, 1886). The Sa`di section of this work has been edited and translated by Roger Le Tourneau as 'Histoire de la Dynastie Sa`adide', *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerraneé* 23 (1977), 1–107; Al-Nāsirī, Ahmad bin Khalid, *Kitāb al-istiqsā li-akhbār duwal al-Maghrib al-aqsā*, vols. 5–7, eds. Muhammad Hajjī, Ibrāhīm Būtālib, Ahmad al-Tawfīq (Casablanca: Matba`at al-Najāh al-Jadīda, 2001). The Sa`di section of Nasiri's text was translated into French by Mohammad al-Nasiri in *Archives Marocaines* 34 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1936).

21 This formal style of writing had been popular in Muslim chancelleries since the Abbasid era. For more on al-Mansur's use of *insha'* literature, see Stephen Cory, "Language of Power: The Use of Literary Arabic as Political Propaganda in Early Modern Morocco," *The Maghreb Review* 30, 1 (2005).

22 Muhammad K. al-Ka`ti, *Tarīkh al-Fattash*, ed. and trans. Octave Houdas and Maurice Delafosse, (Paris: Adrienne-Maisonnueve, 1913).

23 For an English translation of al-Sa`di, see Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire.*

businessmen or officials who were in Morocco around the time of the invasion.[24] Some of them witnessed al-Mansur's preparations for war, while others observed caravans returning to Marrakesh, laden with prizes claimed from West Africa, following the conquest of Songhay. The enthusiastic descriptions of these eyewitnesses largely contributed to European impressions of the sultan's great wealth and his acquisitive motives for the invasion. Yet, for the most part, these Europeans viewed the conquest from the outside and their impressions of the sultan's motives were not gained from interaction with al-Mansur himself.

Finally, there is a considerable amount of royal correspondence that remains from al-Mansur's regime. This includes letters addressed to the Songhay Askias and other sub-Saharan rulers or notables, letters addressed to Moroccans involved with the invasion, letters to European or Muslim courts that refer to the invasion, and official pronouncements meant to be read from the pulpits of the mosques in cities such as Fez or in the region of the Sus.[25] Produced by al-Mansur's court, these letters supply the official explanation for the attack. Unfortunately, there are no private memoirs from Moroccan officials to provide "an inside look" behind the scenes. Such documentation is extremely rare in the pre-modern Islamic world, which considered private revelations as shameful and inappropriate literary topics.

Altogether, these sources provide the only windows through which we can look back into the sixteenth century in order to understand the reasons for the Sa`di invasion of Songhay. Most modern historians base their analyses on the European or West African sources and on al-Ifrani's truncated version of Fishtali's account; Almost without exception, these writers have assumed that al-Mansur's aims in attacking Songhay were primarily for material gain. Only Dahiru Yahya, `Abd al-Karim Kurayyim, and Mercedes García Arenal give serious attention to the sultan's avowed religious motivations for the invasion.[26] The general lack of interest in al-Mansur's caliphal aspirations stems from a twentieth-century bias towards materialist explanations, which fails to give adequate consideration to sixteenth-century realities. This approach can be summarized in the following quote by the French historian Felix Dubois:

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[24] Most of these are found in the mammoth collection of documents assembled by Henry de Castries and associates. See Henry de Castries, Pierre de Cenival, Robert Ricard, Chantal de la Véronne, and Philipp de Cosse Brissac, eds., *Les sources inédites de l'histoire du Maroc de 1530 à 1845*, Première série, dynastie saadienne (1530–1660) (Paris: E. Leroux, 1906–23; *Archives et bibliothèques de Angleterre*, 3 vols. (London and Paris: E. Leroux, 1918–1936); *Archives et bibliothèques de France*, 3 vols. (Paris: E. Leroux, 1905–1911); *Archives et bibliothèques de Pays-bas*, 6 vols. (Paris and the Hague: E. Leroux, 1906–1923); *Archives et bibliothèques de Portugal*, 5 vols. (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1934–1953); *Archives et bibliothèques de Espagne*, 3 vols. (Paris: E. Leroux, 1921–1961).

[25] This correspondence can be found in the following sources: Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*; al-Fishtali, *Manāhil al-safā'*; Gannun, *Rasa'il al-Sa`diyya*.

[26] Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century*, 145–67; Abd al-Karim Kurayyim, *Al-Maghrib fi `ahd al-dawla al-Sa'diyya* (Casablanca: Sharikat al-Taba` wa al-Nashr, 1978), 145–73; Mercedes García Arenal, *Messianism and Puritanical Reform: Mahdis of the Muslim West*, trans. Martin Beagles (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 269–95.

So many attractions gathered together under one sky (in West Africa) could not fail to rouse the attention, and by-and-by the cupidity, of neighboring territories. Chief among these was naturally that country nearest the Sudan, Morocco. From the first their avarice assumed a harshly definite character, for the people of Morocco had not, and never did have, any desire to colonize and develop a commerce, nor even to institute a religious propaganda. They looked upon the Sudan in the light of a gold mine, and their first aspirations, like their ultimate efforts, were concentrated upon the mere drainage of this precious metal.[27]

The following analysis takes a different approach from the conventional view expressed above. Since al-Fishtali generally had a good reputation for reliability among pre-modern Moroccan historians, and since he is clearly the closest remaining historical source to al-Mansur himself, I give preference to his account and to the Moroccan royal correspondence, taking into consideration the writings of al-Sa`di and the European sources. I consider the European accounts to be least helpful for my purposes, due to their lack of access to the Moroccan court and their ignorance of the political and cultural milieu within which al-Mansur operated. As I will show, an analysis that preferences Moroccan sources yields a very different conclusion from that of Dubois.

Peripheral Negotiations?

Part of the criticism of *Manāhil al-safā'* stems from al-Fishtali's seeming obsession with negotiations that modern historians view as peripheral to the main storyline. After describing al-Mansur's conquest of two desert oases along the Saharan caravan route (Tuwat and Gurara), *Manāhil al-safā'* devotes a considerable amount of space to discussing the sultan's dealings with a prominent sub-Saharan African ruler, Mai Idris Aloma of the Bornu. Most modern historians show little interest in al-Fishtali's preoccupation with these negotiations. Dahiru Yahya even asserts that the Sa`di historian is untrustworthy in his description of the Moroccan-Borno diplomatic activity.[28] Thus, it is important to examine this portion of *Manāhil al-safā'* since it touches upon the question of al-Fishtali's reliability as a source. The following analysis considers his account of these negotiations in light of modern historical interpretations.

The Borno dynasty had its capital in the city of Ngazargamu on the banks of the Yo River, near what is now the border between the modern states of Niger and Nigeria. More information about Mai Idris exists than for any other Borno ruler prior to the nineteenth century, due to the survival of Ibn Fartuwa's panegyric chronicle for the first twelve years of Mai Idris' reign.[29] John Hunwick summarizes Ibn Fartuwa's account as presenting "the picture of a vigorous ruler who embarked on a planned policy of securing his borders and pacifying his own domains."[30] The pursuit of this enterprise brought Idris into contact with

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[27] Felix Dubois, *Timbuctoo, the Mysterious*, trans. Diana White (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 122.

[28] Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century*, 150.

[29] Ahmad b. Fartuwa, *The Kanem Wars*, trans. H.R. Palmer in *Sudanese Memoirs* (Lagos: Government publication, 1928), 1: 15–81. Also trans. by J.W. Redhouse, *J. Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 19 (1862), 42–123.

[30] John Hunwick, "Songhay, Bornu and Hausaland in the Sixteenth Century," in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds., *History of West Africa* (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1972), 1: 208.

the superpower then exerting its influence throughout Northeastern Africa, the Ottoman Empire. Idris initially attempted to reach a formal agreement with the Ottomans to protect his sovereignty. When these negotiations broke down, the Borno ruler turned his attention to the other North African power, the Sa`di state in Morocco.

It was evidently the Bornu who took the initial step in this relationship. Al-Fishtali writes, "in the year 990 (1582 CE) al-Mansur received news, while he was in the city of Fez, of the approach of the messenger of the master of the kingdom of Bornu."[31] Apparently the messenger brought with him a large delegation, including a sizeable gift "of what was current among their customs to bring, (a gift) of youthful male and female slaves and sub-Saharan clothing and curiosities."[32] The chronicler goes on to describe al-Mansur's meeting with this convocation on a large plain in the Fez area. The purpose of this visit was "to ask the assistance of the Commander of the Faithful, of armies and warriors and a number of muskets and cannons to battle those unbelievers who bordered (the Bornu) on the far side of the Sudan."[33] However, a problem arose in this initial meeting, which al-Mansur would use to his advantage in his negotiations with the Bornu. "When (Idris Aloma's) letter was read to the Commander of the Faithful, there happened to be a discrepancy between it and the words of the messenger.... So al-Mansur seized the opportunity because of the difference between the messenger and the letter and he held this against the master of the kingdom of Bornu."[34]

Sending the messenger back to Idris Aloma (with the appropriate gifts), al-Mansur stipulated some conditions under which he would provide the requested aid. "He demanded the oath (of allegiance) from them and (required) that they enter into his prophetic summons, which God imposed upon them and upon all the worshippers in the regions of the countries that were submitting to it.... (And he communicated to them) that the holy war, for which they expressed an inclination and a desire, could not be fulfilled ... as long as they had not sought permission in their affairs from the Imam of the community (al-Mansur), whom God had distinguished as Commander of the Faithful in his role as the provider for this community, the inheritor of the legacy of the prophecy."[35] According to al-Fishtali, the Borno messenger took this oath. The scribe includes a copy of the text, which he wrote out and sent back with the messenger to Idris Aloma.

Al-Fishtali appears to have viewed this sequence of events as significant, devoting over seven pages to describing the negotiations. It seems that al-Mansur was hoping to utilize his alliance with the Bornu as a stepping-stone in his attempts to control the Songhay. The Bornu must have understood this, for the messenger, in his initial address to the Sa`di sultan, "compared (his request) to the events in which the Commander of the Faithful had directed his armies for the regional conquest of Tuwat and Gurara, and he

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[31] Al-Fishtali, *Manāhil al-safā'*, 67. All translations from al-Fishtali's text are mine.

[32] Ibid., 67.

[33] Ibid., 67–68.

[34] Ibid., 68.

[35] Ibid.

hoped that (al-Mansur) would make the two of them (Bornu and Tuwat/Gurara) into stirrups for the conquest of the country of the Sudan and capturing its kingdoms."[36]

The main problem with this account is that it does not fit with subsequent events. There is no indication anywhere that al-Mansur provided the military aid that Idris Aloma asked of him. Indeed, given his planned assault upon the Songhay, it is doubtful that the sultan would have had the resources to devote to such an alliance with the Bornu. And there is also no record that the Bornu aided the Moroccans in any way when al-Mansur later launched his offensive against the Songhay capital in Gao. Indeed, there is no further mention anywhere of this supposed alliance, a fact that seems very strange given the strong language in which the agreement was couched.

Yahya views these facts as evidence of al-Fishtali's unreliability. He laments that "our knowledge of the workings of Bornu diplomacy is severely limited by the one-sided nature of our documents, i.e., Osmanli and Sa`di, there being no Bornoan official documents except for some brief references by Ibn Fartuwa."[37] Yahya's interpretation is filled with unfavorable allusions to the Moroccan sultan, such as his statement that "Moroccan official sources *grudgingly* admit that the motive behind the Bornu embassy was Idris Aloma's wish to acquire arms from Morocco and the use of some sharifian soldiers to help wage jihad against the idol-worshippers in the Sudan."[38] Yahya finds it unlikely that al-Mansur could have delivered upon a promise of military aid to the Bornu. However, "to admit all this to the embassy would have been both undiplomatic and harmful to the image of Morocco."[39] Thus, al-Mansur drew out the negotiations in order to buy time, never intending to honor the request. Beyond this, Yahya doubts that Idris Aloma would ever agree to accept "the spiritual supremacy of Morocco by recognizing Ahmad al-Mansur as the only caliph and Imam of Islam."[40] He questions the credibility of the Moroccan records, claiming,

> There seems to be some factual error or at least discrepancy in al-Fishtali's accounts. The statement that the second embassy brought back the draft of 'the Blessed Bay'ah of the ruler of the Bornu' (the oath of allegiance) cannot be correct. The second envoy (as another of al-Fishtali's passages has it) came with the clarification of Bornu's demands, and only after this was he told that recognition of the spiritual suzerainty of Morocco was a condition for any military aid.[41]

Another of Yahya's criticisms of al-Fishtali is based upon the scribe's claim that he himself wrote the oath of allegiance that was agreed to by Idris Aloma. Yahya states that the authenticity of the oath is brought into question by al-Fishtali's admission that the text was not written in Borno. The Sa`di scribe claimed to have written it himself because the people of Bornu did not have a good grasp of Arabic and were generally ignorant, "a claim

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century*, 147.

[38] Ibid., 148, emphasis mine. In my reading of al-Fishtali, I fail to notice the "grudging" nature of this admission.

[39] Ibid., 148.

[40] Ibid., 150.

[41] Ibid.

which was of course baseless. The reputation of Borno scholarship was well established.... The text of the bay'ah reflected the nature of Morocco's foreign policy problems and the theologically-based political arguments used by Morocco's propaganda in the Islamic world."[42] Yahya goes on to conclude that "Moroccan-Borno diplomatic relations were thus inconclusive.... Sharif Ahmad al-Mansur had apparently got some illusory satisfaction from the negotiations, but nothing else came out of them."[43]

However, it is not necessary to interpret al-Fishtali's narrative from such a cynical perspective. For instance, Hunwick accepts the basic outlines of Fishtali's account of the negotiations with Bornu. He interprets the Borno request as having been motivated by a fear of the Ottomans and suggests that this could have accounted for the "marked discrepancy between the contents of the letter and the representations of the ambassador."[44] Hunwick sees the agreement as having immense potential value to al-Mansur, writing that, "Firstly, it would provide him with important support in his challenge to the Ottoman sultan for recognition as supreme head of the Muslim community, in Africa at least. Secondly, it would secure the submission of one of the great empires of the Sudan, leaving him with only the Songhay to subdue—a plan which was no doubt already in his mind."[45] But something went awry. Hunwick speculates that al-Mansur was unable to fulfill his promise of military aid due to his other obligations and that consequently "no appeal for support was made to Bornu by al-Mansur when his forces were engaged in subduing Songhay during the last decade of the century."[46]

Indeed, the discrepancy in al-Fishtali's text to which Yahya alludes is not immediately apparent upon a reading of *Manāhil al-safā.'* The critical statement with which Yahya takes issue (that the second emissary brought back to al-Mansur a copy of the bay'ah) does not appear in al-Fishtali's account. Yahya inexplicably fails to include a reference for this statement, even though he is very detailed in his references in other places. In addition, the theological debate that Yahya accuses al-Mansur of engaging in with the emissary does not appear in the text. As for whether it is realistic to assume that the Borno ruler would submit to taking an oath of allegiance to al-Mansur, Hunwick writes "Bornu, for its part, was apparently willing to pay the price al-Mansur demanded, assuming no doubt that Morocco was too distant for allegiance to its ruler to be anything more than a formality."[47]

Finally, while Yahya may have conclusive evidence that the claim of Borno ignorance was false, it is questionable whether al-Fishtali would have had sufficiently detailed knowledge of the Bornu to verify whether or not this ignorance existed. The text reports that the excuse of Borno ignorance was given by the messenger to al-Mansur as justification for his request that the Moroccans draw up the document of the oath. If the claim was untrue, it seems that the fault lies with the emissary from Bornu and not with al-

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[42] Ibid., 150.

[43] Ibid., 151.

[44] Hunwick, "Songhay, Bornu, and Hausaland," 212.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

Fishtali. Idris Aloma evidently had some reason for wanting the Moroccans to draw up this document, possibly so that he could distance himself from it if the agreement fell apart and the Ottomans chose to take issue with it. Yahya's portrayal of Mai Idris as an innocent victim of al-Mansur's machinations seems somewhat far-fetched. It is much more likely that each of the two sultans was attempting to manipulate the situation to his own perceived advantage. In addition, al-Fishtali was no doubt influenced by a longstanding Maghribi belief in the backwardness of sub-Saharan Africa, a belief that was expressed by Ibn Battuta two hundred years earlier.[48]

To assert that al-Fishtali's account is unreliable simply because it seeks to portray al-Mansur in the most favorable light is unconvincing. To further allege that al-Mansur engaged in these negotiations out of some desire for "an illusory satisfaction," or self-gratification, underestimates the actual advantages of increased prestige that the sultan could potentially have gained from such an alliance. By securing the submission of the Bornu and the Songhay, al-Mansur would have strengthened his hand significantly in his competition with the Ottomans. Although the alliance between Morocco and Bornu failed to materialize in subsequent events, this does not indicate that al-Fishtali invented the entire account.

Illegal Assault?

Having completed his negotiations with the Bornu as well as his invasion of Tuwat and Gurara, al-Mansur now turned his attention directly towards the Askia and the Songhay. In a letter to Askia Ishaq II, al-Mansur demanded that the Songhay ruler pay the Moroccans a tax equaling a mithqal[49] of gold for every load of salt taken from the Songhay salt mines at Taghaza. The sultan claimed that his purpose for the tax was to "spend what accrues from this ... in pursuit of campaigning and jihad."[50] Indeed, it was the Moroccan armies, al-Mansur insisted, that protected the Songhay from being overwhelmed by the forces of European unbelievers. "They are the armies of God," wrote al-Mansur. "Were it not for the fact that their sharp swords form a barrier between you and the infidel tyrants ... (the infidels') flowing torrents would inundate you ... and flood your land."[51] Yet these same Moroccan armies were to be unleashed upon the Songhay Empire, which they were supposedly protecting, shortly after this letter was written. Through a strange twist of logic, the sultan argued that his caliphal responsibility for the defense of Islamic lands justified a bloody attack against a Muslim prince who refused to recognize his authority.

In describing this sequence of events, al-Fishtali emphasizes that al-Mansur did not send off his letter in a hasty fashion. On the contrary, "he did not exchange correspondence

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[48] N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, eds., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2000), 279–304. For a translation of Ibn Battuta's account of sub-Saharan Africa, see Said Hamdun and Noel King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2005).

[49] Equal to a dinar of pure gold, the equivalent of 4.25 gm. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 142, 280, 282, 286.

[50] "Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Askiya Ishaq II, dated Safar 998/December 1589," Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 295.

[51] Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 295.

with him on this until he had asked the *ulama* of his province for a legal opinion … of it."[52] He then adds, "So they gave him a legal opinion … that the control of the mines belongs unconditionally and solely to the Imam (al-Mansur), and that it was not for anyone to have any authority in this matter except by permission of the sultan or his deputies. And al-Mansur sent those *fatwas* (to Ishaq), along with the letter directed to him, with the messenger."[53] When Ishaq delayed in responding to the letter, al-Mansur interpreted the delay as a refusal to submit to the command, and he "became furious. So he decided to send his soldiers to the Sudan. And this was the basis for (his decision) to go towards these lands and to subjugate them."[54]

In light of al-Mansur's clear determination to conquer the kingdom of Songhay, it is not surprising that the *ulama* went along with his request and provided legal justification for his move against the West African state. What is more unexpected is that, within the ranks of the Moroccan notables, there seems to have been some dissent expressed about the idea of military action against Songhay. Al-Fishtali describes the sultan's meeting with "his commanders … and the notables of his kingdom and … the men of judgment."[55] Al-Mansur had apparently called this meeting to gain a rubber-stamp approval for his invasion. However, he was in for a surprise. After detailing his reasons for the expedition, al-Mansur noticed that "those who were present fell silent and did not ask anything. So he said to them 'Are you silent in approval of my opinion or is there a difference between your view of the situation and mine?'"[56] The notables described their reservations, which included the difficulty of launching an offensive across the desert wasteland and the fact that the great Moroccan dynasties of the past (including the Almoravids, the Almohads and the Merinids) had never attempted such a thing. Al-Fishtali reports that the sultan easily answered these objections, pointing to the superiority of the Moroccan weaponry over that of the Songhay, the fact that merchants routinely crossed the desert in safety, and the difference in the situations between the Sa`di dynasty and its predecessors. This explanation seems to have satisfied the notables, for they responded to al-Mansur that "(your) answer was effective and its correctness inspired (us) so that there is no longer anything for anyone to say. There is truth in the saying 'The minds of kings are the kings of minds.'"[57]

Nobody appears to have raised the issue of the appropriateness of one Muslim dynasty invading another, even though there is clear evidence that Songhay was an

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[52] Al-Fishtali, *Manāhil al-safā'*, 122.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 125–126. Al-Sa`di states that Askia Ishaq did respond to al-Mansur's letter, but that "he sent a reply couched in intemperate language, accompanied by a spear and two iron shoes." In a footnote to this passage, Hunwick writes, "The custom of sending a pair of iron shoes as an insult and threat of war is recorded by Park (1815), I, 158. The 'king' of Bambara sent such an object to the 'king' of Kaarta, adding that 'until such time as the king had worn out these sandals in his flight, he should never be secure from the arrows of Bambara.'" Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 187–88. Al-Sa`di's version provides additional insight into the reason why al-Mansur would become so furious over Ishaq's response.

[55] Al-Fishtali, *Manāhil al-safā'*, 126.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 128.

orthodox Muslim regime and that the city of Timbuktu was respected in West Africa as a center of Muslim scholarship. Hunwick quotes a description of the city by al-Ka`ti, who, he says,

> even if we allow for some excess of parochial enthusiasm, has left us a glowing account of sixteenth century Timbuctoo. "Religion flourished and the Sunna enlivened both religious and worldly affairs.... In those days it (Timbuktu) had no equal in the Sudan, from Mali to the edges of the Maghrib, for soundness of institutions, political liberties, purity of customs, security of life and goods, clemency and compassion towards the poor man and the stranger and respect for, and assistance to, the students and men of learning."[58]

Regarding the reputation of Timbuktu, Elias Saad adds:

> Timbuktu was the principal heir to (the) legacy whereby a whole town would be identified on basis of its autonomous leadership as a "city of scholars" or a "city of jurists." In a sense, Timbuktu became the main point of convergence for scholars and literati in the region. Its reputation as a "city of scholars" subsequently overshadowed that of other earlier towns and settlements.[59]

So, if Songhay was a faithful Muslim dynasty, why is there no hint of regret in al-Fishtali's text about the devastation that the Moroccan invasion wreaked upon them? Indeed, no one seems to have challenged al-Mansur on this point except the West African jurist Ahmad Baba, who was exiled to Marrakesh from Timbuktu in the year 1594.[60]

Actually, some objections of this type may have been raised earlier, but they do not appear in *Manāhil al-safā'*. Al-Sa`di describes two earlier expeditions that al-Mansur apparently sent to West Africa in the years 1584–85 and which ended in failure.[61] He claims that the second attempted invasion led to the withdrawal of the Songhay from the salt mines in Taghaza, leaving these mines to be abandoned. Yahya reports that al-Sa`di indicates

> the feelings of Islamic brotherhood of the Moroccan men of religion were shocked not so much by the failure of the expeditions as by "the arson and murder" committed upon their fellow Muslims in the course of these preliminary expeditions. These early unsuccessful expeditions provided grounds for opposition to Ahmad al-Mansur's later plans to wage war against the Songhay empire.[62]

In fact, it was this opposition of the *ulama* to al-Mansur's expansionist plans that, in Yahya's opinion, created the need for the sultan to develop an elaborate ideological justification for the war. Yahya believes that al-Mansur's meeting with the Moroccan notables was staged in order to advocate this ideology and to quell any opposition to the

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58 John Hunwick (citing Mahmud al-Ka`ti), "Ahmad Baba and the Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan (1591)," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2 (1962), 313.

59 Elias Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 18.

60 Hunwick discusses this challenge by Ahmad Baba, found in the pages of al-Ifrani, in "Ahmad Baba and the Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan, 1591," *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* 2 (1962), 319–24.

61 Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 166.

62 Yahya, *Morocco in the Sixteenth Century*, 152–53.

invasion before it arose. The result of this meeting was that "his shrewd manipulation of religion to serve his political and economic interests thus succeeded in silencing those who objected on religious grounds."[63]

While Yahya's interpretation certainly seems plausible in explaining al-Mansur's handling of the question of the invasion's legitimacy, it once again fails to provide an adequate explanation of al-Fishtali's text. As mentioned above, the text omits any doubts on the part of the notables regarding the legitimacy of one Muslim dynasty invading another. If they had such doubts, al-Fishtali does not mention them. Instead, the notables seemed to raise mostly practical questions about the possible success of such an invasion. Yahya, dependent upon the text of al-Sa`di and enamored with his propaganda theory, seems to have once again manipulated the account of al-Fishtali to support his own conclusion.

Perhaps one of the best insights into the sultan's motives can be found in Charles A. Julien's comment that al-Mansur "may have desired to establish a western caliphate that, under the authority of a descendant of the prophet, might later rival the Ottoman caliphate."[64] I believe this is exactly what al-Mansur was attempting to accomplish. This interpretation takes into account all the evidence that we have at our disposal: the sultan's longstanding rivalry with the Ottomans, the intrinsic importance of the Sa`di claim to legitimacy on the basis of their sharifian status, the significance that al-Fishtali placed upon the negotiations with the Bornu, numerous caliphal allusions in the Moroccan correspondence, panegyric references that challenged Ottoman authority in Moroccan texts intended for distribution in the Islamic east, and al-Mansur's own explanation given to his notables that he had been appointed as the representative of God to rule the Islamic community.[65] Viewed from this perspective, al-Mansur's ideological justification appears to be more than simply propaganda developed to quell the reservations of unruly subjects while the sultan made a move to fill his coffers with Sudanese gold. It provides insight into the thought processes of a very ambitious man who had dreams of bringing about a far more significant golden era for western Islam.

An Ephemeral Victory

Once it became clear that Askia Ishaq had no intention of submitting to al-Mansur's authority, the Sa`di sultan began preparations for a full-scale invasion of the Songhay state. After describing these preparations, the army's trip across the Sahara, and its astounding victory over the Songhay, al-Fishtali's narrative shifts back to Marrakesh, where the sultan ordered great celebrations in honor of his army's victory over the Askia's forces. Al-Fishtali describes elaborate festivities, including poetry competitions in which the poets took turns panegyrizing the brilliant Moroccan triumph.[66] Great riches came to Marrakesh from West Africa, including large amounts of gold dust and many slaves, so that al-

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[63] Ibid., 157.

[64] Julien, *History of North Africa*, 232.

[65] For further discussion of this evidence, see Stephen Cory, "Chosen by God to Rule: The Caliphate and Political Legitimacy in Early Modern Morocco" (Ph.D. thesis, University of California Santa Barbara, 2002).

[66] Al-Fishatli, *Manāhil al-safā'*, 156–63.

Mansur paid the salaries of his staff in pure gold.[67] The result of this astounding victory, according to al-Fishtali, was that "the command of al-Mansur was effective from Nubia to the ocean on the western side … (and he gained) marvelous authority that had never existed for anyone before him."[68]

Regarding the success of the invasion, E.W. Bovill writes "The Sudan campaign had certainly failed in its purpose of obtaining control of the sources of the gold, but it had enriched the already wealthy al-Mansur on a scale which cannot have left him with many regrets even if few could share his satisfaction."[69] The sultan invested his additional wealth in improving fortifications for his country's defense and in strengthening industry, such as "re-equipping and developing the important sugar industry of Sus."[70] Other expenditures included lavish support for mosques and madrasas, further improvement of al-Mansur's grand palace in Marrakesh, and plans to construct a huge mosque in the central square of the capital.[71]

Yet, despite these promising beginnings, the Sa`di dynasty ultimately failed in its attempts to hold onto West Africa. After their initial success, Sa`di troops encountered an intensive guerilla war led by exiled Songhay leaders, which eventually undermined Moroccan authority in the region. Within three decades, al-Mansur's son Mulay Zaydan pulled the plug on the invasion. Do these facts support the interpretation that al-Mansur was, indeed, interested only in Songhay gold and not in a long term integration of West Africa into the Sa`di state? What were the reasons for the short duration of effective Moroccan authority in West Africa?

Historians provide two main explanations for this failure. Since most believe that al-Mansur was simply interested in milking profits from the West African gold mines, they argue that he made no effort to develop the infrastructure for a more permanent annexation of Songhay lands. Second, they claim that Morocco lacked the capacity to effectively incorporate the large Songhay territory into the Moroccan empire, since it was separated from southern Morocco by thousands of miles of desert wasteland. Although their superiority in weaponry gave the Moroccans an initial advantage, the permanent annexation of this territory was a different story.

The Moroccan historian `Abd al-Karim Kurayyim contests the first explanation for the failure to annex West Africa. He argues that the Moroccans attempted to create a stable administration to govern the country, and even made efforts to improve agricultural methods in the region. Indeed, the scholar asserts that the majority of the Moroccan officials ruled justly, and did their best to establish peace and security in the former Songhay lands. He also suggests that al-Mansur took concrete steps to deal with Moroccan abuses every time they were brought to his attention, and that he established an administrative system that functioned effectively for the majority of his reign. In explaining the disorder that befell West Africa following the Moroccan conquest,

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67 Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 314.

68 Al-Fishtali, *Manāhil al-safā'*, 163–64.

69 Bovill, *Golden Trade of the Moors*, 196.

70 Ibid., 192.

71 García Arenal, *Messianism and Puritanical Reform*, 277.

Kurayyim places most of the blame upon the Songhay leaders who continued to resist Moroccan authority, leading to a protracted guerilla war throughout the region.[72] In addition, misfortunes occurring within Morocco itself, including an extended plague and internal unrest after 1596, could be adduced to help explain the Moroccan failure to establish a more lasting political association with West Africa.

Lansine Kaba mostly attributes the Moroccan failure to the second explanation listed above, i.e., that Morocco lacked the capacity to effectively incorporate Songhay territory.[73] Kaba argues that, although al-Mansur had developed a highly sophisticated army (by sixteenth-century standards), the Moroccan governmental, societal, and economic infrastructure lacked the same degree of sophistication. Indeed, in order to develop such an army, al-Mansur had been forced to rely largely upon mercenary troops. Since these soldiers lacked any long-term identification with Morocco itself, they were untrustworthy, tending to be overly harsh in their administration and inconsistent in their commitment to the sultan's goals.

As indicated above, most historians conclude that West Africans rejected al-Mansur's justifications for the invasion and largely opposed the Moroccan administration following the conquest. This conclusion is also commonly adduced as evidence to demonstrate the mercenary nature of the Moroccan endeavor. However, Kurayyim points out that the sources identify a number of Songhay leaders who initially welcomed the Moroccans, and who seemed prepared to cooperate with their authority.[74] Numerous abuses committed by Moroccan troops against the local population appear to have turned West Africans against the invaders. Most West Africans' experience of this "unification project" was violence, turmoil, the loss of their possessions, and general anarchy.[75] Whether the rebellious Songhay are blamed for this chaos (per Kurayyim), the mercenary soldiers (per Kaba), or the disingenuous aims of al-Mansur himself (per Yahya), the end result was not conducive to garnering West African support for a greater Western Caliphate headed by al-Mansur.

Kaba argues that al-Mansur's invasion of the Songhay was carried out mostly with Europe in view. Desirous of keeping pace with the European powers, al-Mansur sought to unite West Africa under his authority, in order to utilize its resources to strengthen his position vis-à-vis the other Mediterranean states. However, instead of achieving this goal,

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72 Kurayyim, *Al-Maghrib fi`ahd al-dawla al-Sa`diyya*, 165–71.

73 Lansine Kaba, "Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes: The Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay Resistance (1591–1612)," *Journal of African History* 22 (1981), 457–75.

74 Kurrayim, *Al-Maghrib fi`ahd al-dawla al-Sa`diyya*, 164–65.

75 Al-Sa`di puts it this way: "The Sa`dian army found the land of the Sudan at this time to be one of the most favored lands of God Most High in any direction, and the most luxurious, secure, and prosperous, thanks to the *baraka* (blessing) of the most auspicious, the divinely-favoured Commander of the Faithful Askia *al-hajj* Muhammad b. Abi Bakr, because of his justice and the strictness of his all-encompassing authority, which was as effective at the borders of his kingdom as it was in his palace.... All of this changed then: security turned to fear, luxury was changed into affliction and distress, and prosperity became woe and harshness. People began to attack one another throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, raiding and preying upon property, (free) persons and slaves. Such iniquity became general, spreading, and becoming ever more serious and scandalous." Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 192–93.

Kaba believes the invasion turned out to be a complete disaster, which "finally swallowed up both the conqueror and the conquered."[76] Not only did the continued warfare devastate the West African economy and society, but the cost of supporting a long-distance foreign war placed undue strain upon the Moroccan economy. It drained resources that could have been better used elsewhere to develop an infrastructure to compete economically with the Europeans.

Ironically, Kaba feels that al-Mansur's analysis of the international situation was accurate. "The genius of al-Mansur," he writes, "was to understand that Morocco and the Sudan performed complementary, if not common, economic roles within (the) global system. In this process, it seems that some form of religious unity could have been useful."[77] The downfall of the caliphal dream came in its implementation, when the sultan was unable to achieve the state that he had envisioned. His ambition to create a western caliphate exceeded the resources he possessed to accomplish this goal. A shrewd manager, he funneled these resources into developing a modern army to build upon the Sa`di reputation for military success. While this strategy gave him the ability to win battles, he lacked the wherewithal to maintain and develop the territory he had conquered. Kaba describes the sultan's attempt to utilize modern weapons in the following way:

> The "modern" elements of this dynasty's policy seemed to indicate little qualitative change in the social structures.... The use of "modern" arms by the Sultan's army did not mean that his state had reached a modern stage of development. Rather it indicated that products of modern technology may be "borrowed" and transplanted elsewhere without the social prerequisites and corollary support needed to make them effective.[78]

Perhaps the seeds of ruin also lay in the caliphal dream itself. In looking backwards to the great Islamic dynasties of the past, al-Mansur had chosen a model that was no longer functional in the sixteenth century. As mentioned above, no dynasty had successfully used caliphal claims to assert political and religious authority in a large empire during the three hundred years prior to the rise of the Sa`dis in Morocco.[79] Thus, al-Mansur was attempting a project that was not being undertaken by any other contemporary Muslim dynasty. Not only did he lack the power to enforce universal authority, but there no longer remained

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[76] Kaba, "Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes," 457.

[77] Ibid., 475.

[78] Ibid., 464.

[79] Although the Ottomans claimed caliphal authority for their sultan, this title was clearly added as an afterthought, once the Turkish dynasty had assumed oversight of the holy lands of the Hijaz. It is significant that the caliphal title, "Commander of the Faithful," was rarely used to describe the Ottoman sultan, and arguments in favor of identifying the Ottomans with the caliphate faded away after the sixteenth century. For instance, Colin Imber argues that sixteenth-century Ottoman claims to the caliphate were mostly advanced by the *shaykh al-Islam* Ebû's-Su`ûd to demonstrate the legitimacy of Ottoman assertions of universal Islamic sovereignty, in line with the terms of Islamic law. However, this argument never gained widespread support. "When Ebû's-Su`ûd died in 1574," writes Imber, "the theory of the Ottoman caliphate died with him." Imber, "Ideals and Legitimation in Early Ottoman History," 153.

widespread Islamic support for his interpretation of the caliphate.[80] The world was a much different place than it had been when the Umayyads and the Abbasids had established their legitimacy through the use of caliphal claims. New ways of thinking had even begun to infiltrate both Morocco and West Africa, and this was another factor in the failure of al-Mansur's project.

Kaba makes this observation when he writes that the retreat of the Askia and his entourage into the historic Songhay heartland "galvanized the resistance and gave a 'national' character to it."[81] In a footnote, Kaba explains that resistance to the abuses that the Moroccan army inflicted upon the populace "assumed a 'national' character in that it entailed broad trans-ethnic feelings hostile to alien rule and based on some type of common historical traditions."[82] Thus, Kaba sees the Songhay guerilla movement as representing the beginnings of proto-nationalist feeling in West Africa.[83]

Conclusions

The invasion of West Africa should be viewed in light of the ongoing Sa`di struggle against foreign domination, whether Ottoman or European. The foundation of Sa`di authority rested upon their reputation for successful confrontation with foreign powers and upon the claim that their sharifian status as descendents of the Prophet made them uniquely qualified to rule the Muslim world. The inherent logic of such a claim meant that other Muslim dynasties must be illegitimate. This line of reasoning had been singularly effective in combating the Wattasids, who had no such pedigree to bolster their claims to sovereignty. In order to be consistent, however, it also had to be applied when dealing with other Muslim regimes, even Islamic dynasties that had historically been at peace with Morocco, such as the neighboring governments of West Africa. Indeed, al-Mansur could well have felt that his legitimacy as ruler depended upon a continued extension of his authority over those Muslim states that had not yet submitted to Sa`di supremacy.

The writings of al-Fishtali were produced by a contemporary of al-Mansur who was an eyewitness to many of the events that he records. In light of this fact, al-Fishtali's reports have been too readily dismissed by modern historians. Granted, he was hardly an

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[80] For example, in the late fourteenth century Ibn Khaldun argued that the true caliphate had come to an end after the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. With the rise of the Umayyads, "the characteristic traits of the caliphate disappeared, and only its name remained." Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. and abridged by N.J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 156. This was a commonly held belief among the *ulama*, who took a rather cynical position towards the exercise of worldly authority, even as they encouraged Muslims to submit to that authority.

[81] Kaba, "Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes," 468.

[82] Ibid., 469.

[83] Mohammed Hajji argues that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the beginnings of Moroccan nationalism as well. In his article, "L'Idée de Nation au Maroc et quelques-uns de ses aspects aux XVI et XVII siécles," *Hespéris Tamuda* 9 (1968), 109–21, Hajji discusses the Moroccan resistance against Portuguese and Spanish territorial incursions, and argues that the same resistance displayed against Turkish attempts to exert authority over the region shows that the Moroccan response included an element of national consciousness that superseded religious affiliations.

unbiased witness. As a functionary of the Sa`di state, he may be regarded as providing the official Sa`di version of events. In addition, it must be remembered that al-Fishtali came from a very different world-view than do modern scholars. Thus he had no problem describing the atrocities inflicted upon the Songhay by Moroccan troops, on the one hand, and proclaiming that God won a great victory through al-Mansur's invasion, on the other.

However, if one considers al-Fishtali's premise that al-Mansur was the rightful caliph of the entire Muslim world, it is easier to understand why the sultan needed to take decisive action against an *amir* such as Ishaq who deliberately flaunted his authority. It is also important to keep in mind that al-Fishtali did not possess the benefit of hindsight, as do modern scholars. Never having traveled to the sultanates of Bornu or Songhay, the scribe relied upon reports he received from others regarding the state of affairs in those two empires. Given the constraints under which he wrote, al-Fishtali's account presents reliable information about the events he records. Even his statements regarding the extent of al-Mansur's new empire, which can definitely be shown to have been false, should be understood within the context of Moroccan beliefs, amidst the euphoria that reigned in the country during the months directly following the invasion.

Most modern historians too readily dismiss al-Mansur's Islamic justifications as propaganda that the monarch used on the gullible masses solely in order to achieve his own personal ends. It is possible for propaganda to be believed even by those who propagate it. In the case of al-Mansur, who was raised in an Islamic tradition that emphasized sharifian descent and the great Muslim dynasties of the past, it is entirely plausible that the sultan truly believed himself to be the anointed caliph who would restore the flagging fortunes of the Islamic world. There is no doubt that al-Mansur shrewdly utilized current events to his own advantage. But there is nothing in this fact that contradicts Islamic caliphal tradition.

Al-Mansur observed the economic, cultural, and religious connections between Morocco and West Africa, and argued that there ought to be political unification as well. He believed that unifying West Africa under sharifian caliphal leadership would eventually induce Egypt to submit to Sa`di authority and could create a state capable of challenging the Ottomans for supremacy in the Islamic world.[84] And yet, it was at this point that things broke down, as al-Mansur was unable to achieve his dream of a caliphate that spanned both sides of the Sahara. The unification project for such a broad expanse of territory was too difficult for a moderate-level state such as Morocco to achieve. The difficulty of this project was complicated by the fact that Morocco's lack of sophisticated infrastructure created an extreme reliance upon mercenary troops, which were hard to control over such great distances. Despite the many connections between the two regions, these connections alone were insufficient to support political unification.

If Kaba's argument is correct, al-Mansur's attempt at integrating West Africa into his state had long-lasting disastrous consequences for both North and West Africa. By destroying the strongest state in sub-Saharan Africa, al-Mansur's invasion did irreparable damage to the trans-Saharan trade routes that had enriched both Morocco and West Africa. Instead, this trade increasingly began to be diverted to the south, where it was accessed by European merchants along the Gold and Slave Coasts. The process of devoting all of the state's energies towards the invasion also exhausted the Sa`di dynasty, making it extremely

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[84] Cory, "Chosen by God to Rule," 48–100.

vulnerable to outside interference and collapse, once misfortune hit in the form of the plague and various famines. The sons of al-Mansur tore his dynasty apart after his death, and Morocco would never again become a significant power in the Islamic or Mediterranean worlds.

The ambitious nature of al-Mansur's project led to its eventual undoing. Because he was determined to challenge the Ottomans for Islamic leadership, al-Mansur was driven to expand his state, even when such expansion meant trying to manage a territory located thousands of miles from his capital and across the world's largest desert. By attempting to establish a trans-Saharan political unity under sharifian caliphal leadership, al-Mansur hastened division and decline, leaving both Morocco and West Africa unprotected before the European onslaught that was to come in the following centuries.[85] The sultan's caliphal dream turned out to be just another desert mirage, with disastrous consequences for the region he had sought to unite.

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[85] Kaba makes this point when he writes "With the disaster in the Sudan, the last great Arab hope, unfortunately, came tumbling down. Then there emerged a Europe-centered dominion of the economy from which the Maghrib and West Africa have yet, nearly 400 years later, to recover." Kaba, "Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes," 475.